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SUBJECT: THE UAE'S YOUNG NEW AMBASSADOR -- MBZ'S RIGHT HAND MAN GETS
READY TO TAKE ON WASHINGTON

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Classified by Charge d'Affaires Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: The UAE on 24 March nominated a new Ambassador to the U.S. in the coming months. The choice of 34-year-old Yousef Mana al-Otaiba -- the sharp, loyal, aide and right-hand man to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed (MbZ) -- reflects a desire to heighten the UAE's visibility to U.S. politicians. The appointment places a direct conduit to and from MbZ, Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, at Washington's doorstep at a time when the UAE ambitiously seeks a global reputation. The following cable provides bio and other information on Otaiba, based on Embassy interactions with the young technocrat over the past several years. End summary.

Biographical data: Emirati Son of Privilege

12. (S) Yousef Mana al-Otaiba, born January 19, 1974 in Abu Dhabi, hails from one of the emirate's wealthiest and better connected non-royal clans. A merchant family intermarried with Abu Dhabi's ruling al-Nahyan tribe, the al-Otaiba name has been and continues to be represented in UAE government circles.

13. (S) Yousef is the son of the UAE's first Minister of Petroleum, Mana Saeed al-Otaiba -- one of the country's key non-royal founding members as well as a close confidant to the late UAE founder and President Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan. Yousef was raised in Cairo by his Egyptian mother, from whom he is the only child (Mana Saeed had 4 wives and at least 12 children). Although his studies at the Cairo American College (at the time the premier American School in Cairo) were likely funded by his father's wealth, Yousef likes to reflect on his "modest upbringing" in Egypt as compared to the more opulent life he enjoys as a member of MbZ's entourage. After completing high school in Egypt in 1991, Yousef studied at Georgetown University, where he obtained a degree in International Relations in 11995. He spent the next three years working as Deputy General Manager for the automotive division of his family's firm, the Al Otaiba Group. (Note: Yousef's views of the U.S. may be slightly tarnished by his father's loss of the prestigious General Motors/Cadillac agency in Abu Dhabi after a bitter 11-year dispute over non-performance. End note.) He was then selected to attend the Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF) at National Defense University in Washington, D.C., in preparation for an assignment to join the immediate staff of then UAE Armed Forces Chief of Staff MbZ, a position he assumed upon graduating from ICAF in 2000. Yousef's prominence in MbZ's circles grew from that point; he quips that he was the only civilian in a very military environment before the boss himself became a civilian.

14. (S) The intimacy of Yousef's relationships with his father and half-siblings is unclear. Yousef lives in his father's home in Abu

Dhabi, a palatial residence in which one might cross paths with a sibling infrequently. He also maintains an apartment, or bachelor pad, in the upscale Khalediya neighborhood. Embassy officers observed an awkward encounter in February 2008 when Yousef ran into one of his half-sisters while having dinner with a U.S. delegation. They greeted one another very warmly, but Yousef commented to his U.S. guests that he was the only child from his mother and that there are so many children in his family, "we are more like cousins." He once identified a half brother serving in the motorcade of another visiting U.S. military delegation -- Yousef was part of the VIP entourage, his brother a lesser military officer.

Tackling Diplomacy and Representing the Boss

¶5. (S) It is unclear how Yousef was initially selected to MbZ's staff (i.e., by Yousef's own ambition, his father's intervention, MbZ's personal selection); however, it seems clear that a combination of loyalty, savvy, and smarts have propelled Yousef's quick ascension once he got his foot in the door. Yousef is known to several rotations of Embassy officials as MbZ's right hand man. An all-purpose staffer, Yousef functions as advisor, coordinator, and gatekeeper to the Crown Prince, simultaneously managing the security issues most important to MbZ (such as military procurements and national defense priorities) as well as paying increasing attention to key international economic issues (e.g., Sovereign Wealth Funds, regarding which he personally signed a 12 March 2008 letter to U.S. Treasury Secretary Paulson spelling out Abu Dhabi's policy on international investments; he also wrote a March 19 op-ed for the Wall Street Journal on the same topic). Yousef has quickly transitioned from an observer at MbZ meetings to chairing events as MbZ's representative and becoming the conduit by which U.S. officials often gain access to the Crown Prince.

¶6. (S) Post has found Yousef generally efficient, approachable, and willing to engage, and those who have worked with him note his talent

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for cultivating relationships. He has been responsive to e-mail and text messages, for example, from the Ambassador and other U.S. officers. Still, Yousef increasingly projects a noted air of "wearing his boss' rank," and several U.S. officials have been put off by his seeming self-aggrandizement that is perhaps a product of his close relationship with one of the UAE's most powerful figures. Moreover, upon becoming MbZ's Director for International Affairs in 2005, Yousef displayed a distinct preference for engaging with the U.S. Ambassador or Charge directly when possible. U.S. officials also note that Yousef has become more brazen during meetings, unafraid to ruffle feathers with frank pronouncements, confident that he carries the weight of his boss behind him.

¶7. (S) Indeed, Yousef is widely recognized within Emirati government circles as MbZ's trusted emissary, and (non-royal) UAE officials give his word the expected deference, understanding that it is not Yousef but rather the Crown Prince delivering a message. Still, in a country where protocol and deference to royal authority are of central importance, Yousef clearly understands his limits. When chairing meetings at the technocrat level, Yousef projects a studied air of authority and rank. In settings where the Crown Prince is present, however, Yousef rarely speaks unless MbZ defers to him for details or clarification, or to assist in translating a word from the Arabic; on rare occasions, Yousef will confidently jump in if MbZ is not fully cognizant of the issue being addressed.

¶8. (S) Yousef is acutely aware that he has thus far represented MbZ exclusively. In his current role, Yousef will never attempt, and if asked he will refuse, to speak on behalf of another UAE leader -- even another of MbZ's full brothers (the Bani Fatima) and certainly not for UAE Prime Minister/Vice President and Dubai Ruler Muhammad bin Rashid (MbR). How he balances the broader role of Ambassador will be telling. Yousef's own power will ultimately be limited by an Emirati glass ceiling. The Otaiba family name and Yousef's proximity to the Crown Prince may afford him a position of some prominence, perhaps ministerial, in the future. However, as one of the "muwathafeen" (Arabic for "employee," the word Abu Dhabi's ruling

al-Nahyans often use to describe non-royal government functionaries), Yousef is unlikely to attain a position of real or ultimate authority. (The Bani Fatima hold the key Cabinet portfolios of Intelligence and Foreign Affairs, for example). Moreover, Yousef's partial Egyptian heritage and relationship with a Western woman (he is currently single but has voiced an interest in marriage) may pose a further handicap as his visibility and role in government grow in Abu Dhabi.

Loyal MbZ Mouthpiece...

¶9. (S) A careful and loyal member of MbZ's staff, Yousef is consistently on-point. A smart interlocutor with a firm grasp on the issues he addresses, Yousef's portfolio has become increasingly broad and includes some of the UAE's most pressing political, military, security and economic issues. Typically straightforward and authoritative in bilateral discussions, Yousef does not dance around the issues or shy away from delivering a firm or unpleasant message -- as he did during the 11 March Gulf Security Dialogue when he stated that the UAEG has "no confidence" in the government of Iraqi PM al-Maliki. Yousef is well aware of his boss' positions on the issues within his portfolio, and no matter how candid a discussion, he can be found reiterating the approved MbZ talking points. When pressed to go off-message on an issue for which he does not have a clear or at least general sense of his boss' position, Yousef has been known to become visibly irritated and refuse to answer the question. He is aggressively protective of the UAE's reputation when he feels an interlocutor is being patronizing.

...But Who to Represent?

¶10. (S) Yousef's transition to a position nominally reporting through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may present a protocol challenge for the young technocrat. Yousef has spent his government career navigating one office and reporting to one very senior Abu Dhabi royal personality. As an ambassador, however, he will technically become a voice for the broader UAEG, officially falling under the purview of UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed (AbZ) -- the youngest Bani Fatima brother and himself an MbZ protg -- and also representing MbR, a UAE head of government whose objectives are often Dubai rather than federally focused. It is likely, however, that Yousef will continue to report ultimately to MbZ -- as the Crown Prince's Man in Washington.

¶11. (S) Yousef told Embassy Officials recently that although he had been replaced by Muhammad al-Mazrouie on MbZ's staff in terms of logistics and scheduling functions (while Yousef prepares for his

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departure to Washington), al-Mazrouie would not assume the substantive portfolios Yousef has juggled. Yousef will presumably maintain control over some substantive issues (in essence pushing the traditional MbZ issues while simultaneously performing ambassadorial duties). Moreover, the U.S. portfolio has long been the Crown Prince's bailiwick, and he wields significant influence over UAE foreign affairs in general via his close, mentoring relationship with AbZ and by the nature of his status as a senior al-Nahyan. (Note: MbZ has shown his interest in the foreign policy arena recently by naming 10 UAE military retirees as ambassadors-in-training. End note.) Still, it remains to be seen whether or how much Yousef will also report to other UAEG leaders and how he will juggle various royal personalities should the need arise.

¶12. (S) Moreover, it is unclear at this point whether Yousef will even attempt to effectively integrate into the MFA team at the Embassy, or, as is more likely, recruit his own staff to form the core of a new UAE mission. Yousef has indicated to Embassy staff that he is facing some difficulty assembling a core team; he clearly prefers not to rely on MFA personnel. (According to a reliable source, he is not on good personal terms with another member of the country team -- the current UAE military attach, Brigadier General Mahfooz Muhammad Ahmed al-Sheih. The two may have clashed during a

recent visit by Yousef to the U.S.) He has also brought consultants from the Harbour Group into recent communications on various bilateral (U.S.-UAE) topics, suggesting reliance on professional advice from outside the UAEG altogether. It would not be out of character for private lobbyists to represent the UAE Embassy to USG officials at various junctures.

Dealing with Yousef in the U.S.

¶13. (S) As the product of an American education and a graduate of both Georgetown and ICAF, Yousef is very much in tune with American culture and politics, impressing and relating well to U.S. interlocutors with his near-native English language capability and his very American demeanor. He rarely misses a nuance in idiomatic English conversation. Despite his U.S. background and physical projections of Americanization (including daily workouts at the gym, a preferred meeting place), Yousef ultimately identifies as an Emirati, loyal to Abu Dhabi and its mentality. While friendly with USG officials, Yousef reflects his own government's cautious, at times impatient and cynical attitude towards Washington. Letting him grumble about the frustrations of bureaucracy, as he is prone to do, can build trust in a relationship, although one should not let cynicism become the focus of the conversation. Steering the discussion smartly back to the point of the meeting is important to maintaining rapport with Yousef.

¶14. (S) Yousef can be put off quickly and become testy if he feels an interlocutor is patronizing the UAE by suggesting the U.S. would like to "assess" UAE capabilities in a certain area or if he senses Washington preaching to a policy pupil. He shares the confidence of his boss that the UAE is a maturing state quite capable of understanding regional policy and national interest. That said, Yousef appreciates a frank, blunt message in an honest conversation, and he is not unwilling to carry such messages back to UAE authorities.

¶15. (S) Finally, on key topics critical to the bilateral relationship, Yousef ultimately represents Abu Dhabi first and foremost. To the extent that UAE policy is a product of balancing between Abu Dhabi and Dubai and the smaller emirates, one must assume that Yousef leans toward the Abu Dhabi side of that equation. Whether the topic is sovereign wealth funds, military procurements, or Iran, Yousef delivers careful talking points on federal positions with an Abu Dhabi flair. His forceful and at times aggressive statements on Iran, for example, might well be taken with a grain of salt, as they are reiterations of the traditional (but private) MbZ and Abu Dhabi talking points on the UAE's larger neighbor, not necessarily corroborated with the much more robust economic relationship that country has with Dubai and the northern emirates.

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